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## ADVISING IN GOVERNMENT: AN ACCOUNT OF THE DISTRICT ADVISORY PROGRAM IN SOUTH VIETNAM

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USAWC RESEARCH ELEMENT  
(Essay)

Advising in Government:  
An Account of the District Advisory Program in South Vietnam

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## SUMMARY

An effectively functioning local government organization is widely accepted as a sine qua non for successfully overcoming a Communist inspired "war of national liberation." In South Vietnam, the Viet Cong have long centered their attack on the lower echelons of the government of the Republic. By late 1963, the Viet Cong, aided by government policies that sought to replace the traditional village oriented structure with one emphasizing the hamlet, had for practical purposes destroyed the government apparatus in large regions of the countryside.

Shortly after President Ngo Dinh Diem was overthrown on 1 November 1963, the ruling Military Revolutionary Council adopted a new pacification plan to replace the bankrupt strategic hamlet program. Spelled out in the Chien Thang (Victory) plan, the new scheme envisioned decentralizing pacification activities to defeat the Viet Cong and rebuild the nation.

This change in orientation precipitously thrust the South Vietnamese district into a key, if not the major, role in carrying out the government's local programs. How the U.S. coped with this new situation by instituting the District Advisory Program to "advise in government" is an important chapter in the record of U.S. activities in South Vietnam.

This essay seeks to demonstrate the necessity for effective local government in South Vietnam; then describes the District Advisory Program, as the major U.S. action to strengthen the vital district and village organizations; and finally assesses the results obtained to date.

From a 13 team pilot project started in April 1964, the District Advisory Program has expanded to include more than two-thirds of the 242 districts in South Vietnam. The original two-man team, composed of one officer and one noncommissioned officer, has grown to six men. The scope of duties of the teams has widened to include almost every aspect of governmental activity. Although it is impossible to judge the exact contributions of the advisors, there have been great improvements in local application of pacification measures.

Even assuming that the Viet Cong are defeated militarily or that fighting ceases as a result of negotiations, a district advisory system for "advising in government," whether staffed by military officers or civilians, will be a powerful instrument to help bring about the kind of government-people relationship that will assure peaceful conditions persist.

## ADVISING IN GOVERNMENT:

### AN ACCOUNT OF THE DISTRICT ADVISORY PROGRAM IN SOUTH VIETNAM

In South-East Asia we were transfixed by the stars when we should have been searching among the stones. We rode on horseback and saw only the flowers. We looked for figureheads when we should have been looking for people. We conceded the mountains, the forests, and the paddy fields to the Communists and put our energies in the cities. We raised armies instead of living standards. Because someone once called the Chinese Communists agrarian reformers, even the idea of helping peasant villagers, who comprise 80 percent, or more, of the population of the underdeveloped countries, seemed suspect. - Denis Warner<sup>1</sup>

Coming from such a qualified observer of the Southeast Asian scene as Denis Warner, the Australian reporter, this is indeed a cutting indictment of U.S. policy in South Vietnam. However, it must be remembered that Mr. Warner's statement, as it applies to South Vietnam, was framed in the context of the situation as he assessed it early in 1964. This was but a few short months after President Ngo Dinh Diem was overthrown and killed on November 2, 1963. The turbulence at that time in Saigon masked the few significant activities focusing on the Vietnamese countryside that were beginning to be productive. Nevertheless, his appraisal was essentially accurate. Obviously, changes were required.

It has been since early 1964 that more adequate attention has been directed toward the peasants living in the rural areas, who, exceeding the Southeast Asian norm, make up 83 percent of the South

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<sup>1</sup>Denis Warner, The Last Confucian, pp. 311-312.

Vietnamese population.<sup>2</sup> One of the most noteworthy steps, demonstrating this shift in emphasis and recognizing the criticality of the rural people, was the introduction of U.S. advisors at the district level. This downward and outward extension of the advisory effort began on a trial basis in April 1964. It had expanded by the end of 1965 to a full-scale program involving more than two-thirds of the 242 districts in South Vietnam.

An account of the district advisory program--a story of "advising in government"--reveals a large measure of the nature of the current effort in Vietnam to defeat the Communist strategy. This is none other than the well known strategy of the "People's War" described originally by Mao Tse-tung. It has been reiterated, as recently as September 3, 1965, by Marshal Lin Piao, Chinese Communist Minister of Defense, when he recited Mao's "theory of establishing revolutionary base areas in the rural districts and encircling the cities from the countryside."<sup>3</sup>

#### VIET CONG ANNOUNCE THEIR PLANS

The appropriateness of directing increased attention to the countryside, particularly to strengthen and invigorate the governmental machinery there, becomes all the more apparent when the

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<sup>2</sup>Cao Van Lac, Briefing on the Problem of Rural Reconstruction, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup>Lin Piao, "Long Live the Victory of the People's War," Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Report, No. 171 (4S), 3 Sep. 1965, p. 22.



announced plans of the Viet Cong for 1966 are considered. On December 21, 1965, Nguyen Huu Tho, Secretary General of the National Liberation Front, the Viet Cong's political arm, announced over the front's clandestine radio stations a five-point program. The two points dealing with political-military activities, as reported by the New York Times, are:

- Return to guerrilla warfare "to erode McNamara's plan" to bring the Viet Cong into an "open fight."
- Mobilize Viet Cong manpower to "consolidate the countryside, the villages and the hamlets."<sup>4</sup>

There is ample indication in this announcement that the Viet Cong's plans for 1966 will be to shy away from big battles, such as Plei Me, the Ia Drang Valley, the "Iron Triangle," and the Michelin Rubber Plantation. In these engagements they have sustained heavy casualties without apparently achieving their objectives. Instead, they apparently intend to concentrate again on the political front using proven techniques of propaganda, persuasion, and terror--all backed with evident military power. These methods have been successful in the past especially when inexpertly opposed at the local level by the South Vietnamese government.

This article first seeks to demonstrate the necessity for effective local government in South Vietnam; then describes the district advisory program, as the major U.S. action to strengthen the vital district organization; and finally assesses the results

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<sup>4</sup>Ruben Salazar, "Radio Hints Vietcong Avoids Big Battles," Washington Post, 24 Dec. 1965, p. 1.

obtained to date. It is based on personal experiences of the author in South Vietnam from September 1963 to June 1965, which included an intimate working relationship with the district advisory program both in the field and at the policy level.

#### THE DISTRICT IN THE ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE

The district is the administrative counterpart of a county in the United States. Circumstances have precipitously thrust the South Vietnamese district into a key, if not the major, role in the strategic campaign known as pacification underway throughout the countryside. This critical position of the district in local affairs is not part of the Vietnamese tradition but has been brought about by the product of insurgent pressure and the chronic instability and weakness of the Republic of Vietnam's top echelons of government since late 1963. Moreover, the legal authority for the district's administrative powers, basic Ordinance 57A issued in 1956 during President Diem's tenure, merely describes the district as a territorial subdivision of the province, operating in behalf of the province chief.<sup>5</sup> How the U.S. has contended with this new situation by instituting the District Advisory Program is an important chapter in the record of U.S. activities in South Vietnam.

It is useful at the outset to describe the district in terms of its position in the administrative hierarchy. Beneath the

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<sup>5</sup>Joseph J. Zasloff, A Study of Administration in Binh Minh District, p. 3.



central or Saigon level of government in the unitary system of the Republic of Vietnam are the chiefs of the 43 provinces into which the country is divided. To carry the analogy with the U.S. system a bit further, the province can be fairly accurately equated to a state. The Prefecture of Saigon and four autonomous cities--Hue, Da Nang, Dalat and Vung Tau--also have status roughly equivalent to that of a province. For accuracy, it must be pointed out that there are four regional government delegations (territorially corresponding to four military corps tactical zones) and the Capital Military District (around and including Saigon). They function at an intermediate level between the central and the provincial echelons although they have little actual administrative importance. The political influence of the regional delegate, who is also the military corps commander, seems to depend on the incumbent rather than the position itself. Only General Nguyen Bao Tri, who commands the I Corps Tactical Zone (made up of the five northernmost provinces) exhibits undisguised political ambitions. He is remembered as a leader of the unsuccessful coup attempt against President Diem in November 1960, and he appears now to be using his regional delegate position to promote regional influence for personal power. Less organized regionalism exists in the III and IV Corps Tactical Zones in the Mekong Delta. Here it has not been seized by a strong leader and is not yet considered a potent political factor.

The district, which has already been compared administratively to a U.S. county, is immediately subordinate to the province as shown

in the accompanying diagram. Each of the 43 provinces is divided into from two to 11 districts,<sup>6</sup> which are presided over by the district chiefs, named by the province chief with the approval of the regional delegate (also military corps tactical zone commander) and the Minister of Interior. A typical district has about 10 villages, although some have as few as two and others have up to 57.<sup>7</sup> At the lowest end of the political structure is the hamlet of which there are over 16,000 in South Vietnam.<sup>8</sup> According to Vietnamese law there is an intermediate level of local administration known as the canton between the village and the district; but this is more of a traditional arrangement which is not generally in use at the present.<sup>9</sup>

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DISTRICTS

Characteristics of the districts and hence the problems that are faced in the day-to-day counterinsurgency struggle within them vary greatly. A surprising range of climate, geography, economic prosperity, population, and area would be observed if one made a trip from the "South Sea Island" district of Phu Quoc (nestled between South Vietnam and Cambodia in the Gulf of Siam), across the rice-rich Mekong Delta, through the populous semi-urban districts

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<sup>6</sup>US Dept of State, USOM-Saigon, Public Administration Bulletin, No. 19, pp. 4-5, and attachment.

<sup>7</sup>Lloyd W. Woodruff, assisted by Nguyen Ngoc Yen, Local Administration in Vietnam: The Number of Administrative Units, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

near Saigon, up into the wilderness known as the highlands, and then back down the teeming coastal lowlands to Saigon. On the development scale, the relatively prosperous war-bolstered economy of districts near Saigon or close by large U.S. installations, at one extreme, contrasts drastically with the forlorn, war-torn, and almost forgotten frontier districts in several of the highland provinces or in the isolated area of the Ca Mau Peninsula. Racial patterns also show extreme variations among districts. Some are populated predominately by Vietnamese of Cambodian origin (i.e., Khmers who normally desire to live peacefully aloof from ethnic Vietnamese); others are made up almost entirely of Montagnard tribesmen from one of the twenty-odd distinct mountain tribes; and a few have large Chinese populations, particularly if the district incorporates a small urban center to which Chinese entrepreneurs are attracted. Religious patterns change from area to area. Catholics tend to be found in clusters as a result of resettlement policies adopted during their exodus from North Vietnam in 1954 after the Geneva settlement. Members of the Hoa Hao sect have practically taken over many districts in the trans-Bassac region of the Mekong Delta. Another sect, the Cao Dai, predominates in large portions of Tay Ninh Province and in several delta-districts. Nevertheless, nominal and practicing Buddhists, numbering upwards to 12 million, make up the preponderant majority in most districts.

Like counties in much of the United States, districts were not established in Vietnam on the basis of size or population.

District area, for example, ranges from 67 square kilometers (Go Vap in Gia Dinh Province) to 4875 square kilometers (Ban Me Thuot in Darlac Province). Population varies similarly from less than 2000 in Chuong Nghia District, Quang Ngai Province, to almost 200,000 in the most populous districts.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of location, state of economic development, racial pattern, dominant religion, size, or population, all districts have essentially the same administrative structure which is established by government ordinances, decrees, and instructions. Quite naturally the number of officials and cadre (temporary officials) on the payroll varies widely. One feature dubiously shared by almost every district is the presence of a shadow Viet Cong district administration roughly comparable in its functional breakdown to the legitimate organization.

It was into these diverse, yet essential, district arenas that U.S. advisors were introduced beginning in 1964. This step was a major effort to bring better, more dynamic governmental activities into direct contact with more of the people and, at the same time, to increase and intensify local actions against the Viet Cong. However, before describing the district advisory program, a brief assessment of the conditions that prevailed will make the description more meaningful.

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 13.



### CONDITIONS IN EARLY 1964

One veteran observer has described 1964, the year during which General Nguyen Khanh ruled South Vietnam, as the most frustrating and turbulent in the experience of Americans since they had become deeply involved in Vietnamese affairs in 1954.<sup>11</sup> Measured by almost any yardstick, there were few signs of real progress against the Viet Cong during early 1964; but there were several clear indications that the overall situation was becoming increasingly serious. In hopes that the South Vietnamese would be encouraged to fight more effectively against the Viet Cong--whose support from North Vietnam had been steadily increasing both in numbers of trained soldiers and cadre infiltrating down the Ho Chi Minh trail and in the quality and quantity of weapons being smuggled into the South by land and by sea--the American commitment was being expanded significantly.

At that time, unfortunately, an observation by the same reporter that "more and more Americans were in Vietnam, but they seemed, in ratio, to be accomplishing less and less"<sup>12</sup> was accurate in the broad sense. A similar accusation could be leveled fairly against the Government of Vietnam which with more administrators, more soldiers, and more rural cadre was unable to extend effective government to the countryside. Neither could the government provide

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<sup>11</sup>Robert Shaplen, The Lost Revolution, p. 235.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 236.

security to more than a small fraction of the strategic hamlets built at such great effort and expense under President Diem. Furthermore, the government was doing little to promote social and economic reforms in the hamlets.

General Khanh frankly acknowledged his government's difficulties by pronouncing in his March 1964 "Program of Actions" that, "the people kept more and more away from the government, were no longer interested in fighting for survival, and were gradually approaching annihilation."<sup>13</sup> Khanh's plan to save South Vietnam embodied the so-called "oil spot" concept of pacification in which strengthened and reorganized armed forces would join with local civilian cadre to improve simultaneously security and living standards in the countryside little-by-little and area-by-area. Decentralization of governmental powers was a key element of the program. "We shall place confidence in the anti-Communist patriotic elements in the various localities in establishing their own substructure," General Khanh avowed, "because only local people [emphasis added] can exterminate the Communist traitors from their localities."<sup>14</sup>

#### DISTRICT ADVISORY TEAMS ARE INTRODUCED

Amid these turbulent conditions, a Washington decision was made, in response to a recommendation from the U.S. authorities in Vietnam,

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<sup>13</sup>General Nguyen Khanh, as quoted by Robert Shaplen, Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

to place U.S. advisory teams, on a trial basis, one level lower in the Vietnamese administrative hierarchy at district. Before, advisory teams had been restricted to province level. (Of course, purely military advisors had been assigned for more than a year to battalion-size units throughout the Army of Vietnam.) The initial trial plan placed 13 teams of one Army captain and one Army sergeant each in important districts of "critical" provinces designated in the pacification campaign plan, known as the Chien Thang (Victory) plan.<sup>15</sup> This reaching out with the advisory effort complemented General Khanh's directive to decentralize the execution of pacification activities.

This decision to extend the advisory effort was not simple. To some Vietnamese leaders advice was an anathema--something that had to be tolerated in exchange for the huge quantities of U.S. aid which their country was receiving. There was, therefore, genuine uneasiness among some of them that Americans, if placed at district, might be directed by the U.S. Mission to carry out unilaterally U.S. instituted programs thereby effectively bypassing responsible Vietnamese government echelons. There also were some feelings among American and Vietnamese officials alike in Saigon that the limited district staffs would be overwhelmed with advice and advisors thereby becoming more disorganized and even more dispirited than they already were as a result of the reverse trend the war had been

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<sup>15</sup>Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam, Chien Thang National Pacification Plan (U), Feb. 1964. TOP SECRET

taking. However, as so often is the case in the strange war in Vietnam, an informal poll of district and province chiefs produced the somewhat unexpected finding that they were generally highly favorable toward having district advisors.

Several other arguments weighed against district advisors. Because Communist propaganda was playing the theme that Khanh, like Diem before him, was a U.S. "lackey," installing district advisors would surely give Viet Cong propaganda new neo-colonial teeth. Even in some U.S. circles, the idea smacked of enlarging military influence in an area having important, if not overriding, political aspects. Also there was a certain uneasiness that the carefully developed balance found at the province among the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), the U.S. Operations Mission (the local AID group known as USOM), and the U.S. Information Service (USIS) would be violently disturbed by the introduction of a purely military team at the next subordinate level. Increased exposure of American personnel to Viet Cong attack and terrorist action in poorly defended district towns was frequently cited as a compelling disadvantage.

Nevertheless, the 13 pilot teams were deployed in April and May 1964. The aforementioned concern about security was borne out immediately as the first casualty among district advisory personnel was reported within six hours after the arrival of the first team at its station. Fortunately, the slightly wounded noncommissioned officer quickly returned to duty and there were no more casualties



in the 13 test districts. The districts had been chosen for the experiment based on a criterion that they were "secure."

#### RESULTS BEGIN TO SHOW

The first teams found their tasks difficult. Disorganization in the districts was even greater than had been expected; morale was very low among district officers and civil servants. The two recent coups at the top had created conflicting pressures below between civilian and military echelons and among civilian ministries. Cadre organizations, essential for carrying government action to the people, were in shambles. Ammunition and equipment, and in some cases pay, had been slow in flowing to the paramilitary forces during the period after their transfer from the Ministry of Interior to the Ministry of Defense. Changes in the plan of action under the Chien Thang plan,<sup>16</sup> in which the Ap Chien Luoc (Strategic Hamlets) were replaced by Ap Tan Sinh (New Rural Life Hamlets), isolated hamlets were to be abandoned, and static outposts were to be eschewed in favor of mobile defense, needless to say disturbed the district chiefs and their small, inexperienced staffs.

The nature of the district advisor's assignment is summed up by a national news magazine as ". . . one of the loneliest, most hazardous forms of duty a soldier can draw."<sup>17</sup> The article further describes an advisor being "sent to Duc Pho / District in Quang Ngai

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., Annex E.

<sup>17</sup>"A Captain's Legacy," Time, Vol. 86, 24 Dec. 1965, p. 10.

Province<sup>7</sup>, which is surrounded by Viet Cong territory and accessible only by air. There Captain Rod, 31, shared responsibility for the welfare of some 10,000 civilians, mostly refugees from Communist held villages."<sup>18</sup> The attitude of American advisors under these circumstances is captured by a correspondent who visited Kien Bien District, not far from the Gulf of Siam, and reported: "The Americans there are surrounded by VC but they are incredibly hopeful, optimistic, and content with what they are doing. So is the Vietnamese district chief."<sup>19</sup>

As a result of this prevailing attitude, some encouraging signs began to show rather soon after the first 13 teams were deployed. Isolated districts became closer partners in provincial affairs. Communications improved--partly because the advisory team established a second radio link with the province. People rather than messages began to move back and forth often times in helicopters that now began regularly visiting the districts, if for no other reason than to deliver the advisor's mail. Districts began submitting recommendations and developing plans whereas previously a district often first learned about "its plan" when it received the plan from province with instructions to begin executing it. Close military ties developed rapidly between the teams and the district staffs. Soon these ties broadened to encompass social and economic aspects of the district's activities.

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Wesley Pruden, Jr., Vietnam: The War, p. 157.

### THE DISTRICT ADVISORY PROGRAM IS EXTENDED

These early favorable indications were encouraging enough by the time of the June, 1964, Honolulu Conference, attended by Secretaries McNamara and Rusk, for General Westmoreland, the military commander in Vietnam, to recommend earliest possible expansion of the district advisory program by 100 additional teams. One-hundred approximated the number of districts, out of a total of 242 throughout South Vietnam, in which conditions were at least marginally favorable at that time for pacification progress, given the necessary outside support and effective local leadership. General Westmoreland's recommendation was approved; and, since the Vietnamese government was in agreement, a high priority program was initiated immediately in order to field the 100 new teams as rapidly as practicable during the period from September to December, 1964.

The main argument used to support the need for district advisors is summed up well in this assessment of South Vietnam:

The key to good government in Vietnam is the province and district chiefs. In the past in provinces where these officials have been good, the government control and support have prospered; where the officials were bad or ineffective, the Communists have gained. These trends have been evident with a poor central government; with help from a good central government, the trends will become even more obvious.<sup>20</sup>

Based on experiences during the pilot, 13-team project in which two-man teams were sent to the districts, a five-member composition

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<sup>20</sup>Thomas W. Bowen, "The Misunderstood Man," Army, Vol. 15, Aug. 1965, p. 44.

was selected for the new teams as well as the original ones. A typical team, allowing for local variation to conform with a particular situation, had the following personnel:

District Advisor	Major or Captain
Assistant District Advisor	Captain or Lieutenant
Operations and Intelligence Sergeant	E7 (Master Sergeant)
Medical Advisor	E6 (Sergeant First Class)
Radio Operator	E5 (Sergeant) or E4 (Corporal)

As a result of pressing requirements for more effective local operations and urgent requests from Vietnamese and American leaders in the field, the number of teams has grown to 168, with more planned during 1966. Operational experience pointed to the need for a sixth team member--an additional noncommissioned officer, grade E6--who has subsequently been added. This individual advises and assists in training and tactical employment of district armed forces, usually Regional Force companies and Popular Force platoons. Further, tailored groups of specialists--engineer, signal, and medical technicians--have been assigned to certain province advisory teams to be used flexibly among the several districts within the province to provide hitherto unavailable technical capabilities. The emphasis has been on composing each particular district team to fit the peculiar local situation rather than relying on one fixed organizational pattern. In practice, full authority to alter the team composition has been delegated to subordinate echelons controlling the teams in the field.



## PROBLEMS IN THE DISTRICTS

The task of the Vietnamese district organization is staggering, even considering the considerable capabilities offered by the district advisory team with the backup U.S. support the team can tap. An authoritative Vietnamese document<sup>21</sup> describes some of the multitudinous functions of the district chief:

- He is administratively responsible for the district schools, the medical dispensaries, and all social services.

- He supervises the maintenance of public buildings, bridges, and roads in the district.

- He insures that village administrative authorities perform their duties effectively.

- He is responsible for tax administration, looking into the efficiency of tax collection, and examining accounting procedures.

- He must inspect and supervise other financial matters of the village such as the collection of fines.

- He serves as coroner.

- He is an assistant to the public prosecutor for the province. He gathers evidence and brings offenders to court.

- He has the power to arrest and detain violators of the law.

These are just some of the peacetime functions of a district. Under conditions of advanced insurgency amounting to a very real

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<sup>21</sup>Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam, III Corps Tactical Zone, The Role of the District Chief, pp. 1-6.

wartime situation, the district chief has a myriad of additional tasks. For example:

- He is commander of a substantial number of military forces-- on the average two Regional Force companies (300 men), 500 Popular Forces organized into separate platoons, a Regional Force boat platoon comprised of four to six armed and armored patrol craft if the district is in the delta region, and a platoon of artillery (two 105 mm or 155 mm howitzers). On any large scale operation involving a substantial portion of the force, he is expected to lead the force in the field.

- He operates his own intelligence and counterintelligence systems using assigned military and police personnel, which he augments with secret agents and paid informers.

- He supervises the youth service designed to mobilize young people for necessary civil defense tasks and to orient them toward the government and away from the Viet Cong.

- He recruits, sometimes trains, and guides the use of a variety of cadre (temporary civil servants who perform duties of limited scope in an effort to improve government services at the hamlet level under the pacification program).

- He carries out the district pacification program.

#### PACIFICATION, THE DISTRICT'S GOAL

A brief description of "pacification" will illuminate the district chief's functions better than a detailed explanation of

the responsibilities listed above. Pacification refers to the total counterinsurgency effort and is the integrating concept for defeating the Viet Cong and building a nation. Basically it includes military suppression of the insurgent Viet Cong and, behind the protective screen of military force, concurrent political, economic, psychological, and social measures designed to demonstrate to the populace that life under the government of Vietnam is practical and desirable. The manifold aspects of pacification are intricately interwoven. Essentially no plan, operation, activity, or event that is part of pacification can be purely military, without civil implications, and vice versa. Every gain in winning the support of the people in the rural areas will lessen the military burden; each military victory will turn more people toward the government, the number and degree of affiliation depending in part on the effectiveness of the attendant psychological campaign. Carried out in its proper manner, pacification is a methodical person-by-person, house-by-house, hamlet-by-hamlet process. Each of the four key requirements--eliminating the Viet Cong shadow political structure, providing 24-hour security for the village and hamlets, operating an effective system for population and resources control throughout the area, and establishing good communications with the people--must be attained and sustained until peace is restored throughout South Vietnam.

The burden of converting pacification theories and programs into meaningful actions devolves heavily upon the district chief

and his small, poorly trained civilian and military staff. He may consider himself lucky today if he has one graduate of the excellent National Institute of Administration in Saigon to serve as his principal civilian deputy. Nevertheless, it is true that the district chief more than any other Vietnamese administrator has direct contact with a significant sector of the population.<sup>22</sup> He symbolizes the degree of trust and effectiveness of the Central Government in the countryside. Based on a 1961 study by the Michigan State University, Vietnam Advisory Group of the district chief in action, it was concluded that a distinction should be made

between the formal, subordinate, and relatively impotent position of the district chief and the practical dynamic possibilities in this position. In practice the knowledge which the district chief has of his district can play a major role in the decisions of the province chief applying to his district.<sup>23</sup>

This great potential has finally been recognized by the government of Vietnam which now looks much more to the 242 district chiefs as its field foremen for pacification. The assignment of U.S. advisors to the districts, if it did not actually spur this belated recognition of the district's role, certainly reinforces the district's position.

#### THE TASKS OF THE DISTRICT ADVISORS

The scope of the district advisor's tasks can be appreciated better if the team's operations are dissected and some illustrative

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<sup>22</sup>Luther A. Allen and Pham Ngoc An, A Vietnamese District Chief in Action, p. v.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 65.



example cited. The mission of the district advisory team, derived from Terms of Reference published by the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam in September 1964, is to extend the effectiveness and capabilities of the U.S. Mission in aiding the Republic of Vietnam by "advising and assisting the district chief (concurrently the military subsector commander) in the overall conduct of the counterinsurgency campaign."<sup>24</sup> Subsidiary goals of the district team are to extend the programs of the province advisory team (an element of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) and to further programs of other U.S. agencies, but only in coordination with the agency representatives responsible for the region in which the particular district is located.

The importance and complexity of the district advisors' work are reflected in the instructions given to the team which state:

As the U.S. representatives closest to the populace, the subsector [i.e., district] advisory team will largely determine the local effectiveness of the total U.S. effort. This circumstance will lead to involvement in many projects beyond military advice and assistance.<sup>25</sup>

In practice, some teams have been required by the situation they faced and the manner in which the Vietnamese district chief operated to devote three-quarters of their energies to nonmilitary matters. An equal split between military and civil activities is common among many advisory teams.

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<sup>24</sup>US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Terms of Reference, Subsector /District/ Advisors, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup>US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Information for Subsector /District/ Advisors, p. 19.

Although not precisely stated anywhere, the basic purpose of the district team is to induce a situation in which the total range of government services, many of which are available through U.S. aid, begin to reach the people for whom the services are intended. A leaky pipeline running from the central government to the people is sometimes used as an analogy to depict the undesirable situation that existed in early 1964. An adequate input of goods, services, and money is shown leaking out in Saigon, to the military commands, into hands of grafters and even the Viet Cong, and to the province and district capitals with the resultant flow to the people being a mere drip. The solution obviously is to plug the unauthorized leaks so that an adequate flow from the input end of the pipeline to the proper outlet--the people--results. The necessity for improving distribution of aid is pointed out by John Mecklin, former Director of the United States Information Service in Vietnam, in his recent book. "The U.S.," he implores,

should abandon the idea . . . that economic and military assistance was a strategic government-to-government operation, especially in a struggle against guerrillas. Aid should be given only on the specific understanding that American advice on its use must be needed all the way down to the point where the last cartload of fertilizer was delivered to the peasant.<sup>26</sup>

Aid, according to Mecklin, used properly becomes a tactical weapon to counter the Communists political, economic, and psychological action at the rice roots.<sup>27</sup> It goes without saying that the district advisor is an ideal tactical supervisor.

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<sup>26</sup>John Mecklin, Mission in Torment, p. 314.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

The possibilities for corruption in the strained and imperfectly operating Vietnamese government are wide open. Malcolm Browne, the Associated Press correspondent, summed up the particular situation at the district level as follows:

An ordinary Vietnamese army captain does not have an enviable job in South Vietnam . . . if this captain happens to land a job as a district chief, he becomes a little emperor. As the chief tax collector, conscription officer, judge, public prosecutor, police chief, contract officer and everything else rolled into one, he literally has the power of life and death over his subjects. . . . If you were a Vietnamese army captain earning \$40,000 a month wouldn't you like to be a district chief?<sup>28</sup>

The presence of the U.S. district team, participating actively in pacification activities throughout the district, serves to damp out most corrupt practices automatically and to uncover those few cases where they persist. Several rotten district chiefs have already been removed because of evidence against them revealed by district advisors.

Although there have been and will continue to be cases of malfeasance, it is apparent that the Vietnamese military officers, as a group, have had the best general training and experience for local administrative office under the difficult conditions that exist. Former U.S. Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor once stated, in speaking of using military officers as civilian administrators, "We can't afford the luxury of discriminating against a man because of the color of

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<sup>28</sup>Malcolm W. Browne, The New Face of War, pp. 208-209.

his coat. You have to use administrative talent where you find it."<sup>29</sup> Therefore, it is quite appropriate to use U.S. military officers, who have had similar training and experience, as advisors to the Vietnamese military officers serving as district chiefs. In fact, close rapport has in almost every case developed quickly between advisor and advisee with the usual result that district operations substantially improved soon after the advisory team arrived.

#### AN ASSESSMENT OF RESULTS

In the summer of 1965, after more than 100 district advisory teams had been operating from six to nine months, a joint military-civilian survey was made to assess how the teams functioned and what had been their effect on Vietnamese, as well as U.S., programs at the local level.<sup>30</sup> Although, as previously described, the specific district situations varied widely, the team's activities were remarkably similar. The average team devoted slightly less than one-half its energies to military matters, between one-quarter and one-half to civilian-type functions, and the remainder to administratively running the team and participating in district social and ceremonial activities. Not unexpectedly, the survey showed that the nature of a team's work and its positive contributions to pacification were

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<sup>29</sup>Maxwell D. Taylor, as quoted by Malcolm W. Browne, Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>30</sup>US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Functioning of Sector /Province/ and Subsector /District/ Teams, pp. 1-9.



strongly dependent upon the willingness of the district chief to accept advice and assistance, a state which had its foundation on good rapport between the advisors and the district chief and his staff. The district chief of Nha Be once remarked that he would undertake nothing without first consulting with his advisor, Captain Ray, whom he considered as his principal assistant. This advisor, later killed by the Viet Cong while on a patrol with district forces, was able to bring about many desirable changes in Nha Be which resulted in economic betterment for the residents and much improved security around the critical gasoline storage facilities located there.

The 29 teams examined shared for the large part common experiences. The military connected activities of most teams centered around combat operations, with the bulk of effective advisor participation being in the preparatory stages to obtain necessary air, artillery, and other types of support, to coordinate fire and logistic support with the plan of maneuver, and frequently to perform reconnaissance. During operations the advisors frequently brought up matters requiring decision and subsequent action while continuing to be involved in obtaining and coordinating fire, logistic, and medical evacuation support. After operations the advisors through their comments and suggestions had been quite successful in correcting errors and overcoming deficiencies. The survey showed that the medical technician in almost every team was fully employed treating Vietnamese military personnel in garrison and on operations, promoting medical civic action, and assisting the district public health service, if one was

present, in operating the district dispensary. Practically every team was engaged in intelligence collection, processing, and use. Some teams trained district intelligence personnel and assisted in training Regional Force intelligence squads. Logistical assistance, including making arrangements for aerial supply, helped make the district civilian and military logistical support systems more responsive.

In the civilian field, it was apparent that the district teams had spurred the self-help program--the program through which hamlets receive material assistance for schools, dispensaries, roads, wells, pig pens, etc., that the local populace constructs itself. When U.S. officers with engineering experience were assigned to the district teams, they often were called upon to help prepare construction plans and supervise the actual construction because Vietnamese engineers are rarely a part of a district organization. Teams were involved in suggesting worthwhile projects, financed by national rural construction funds, to improve economic and social conditions. Since the civilian logistic system in the districts was considerably weaker than the military system, advisors often concentrated on improving civilian logistics by monitoring requests, initiating follow-up action, assisting in the distribution of commodities, and monitoring the use of materials such as cement and roofing. Almost all district teams made significant contributions to the public health program. Other civilian-type activities carried out by some teams included: planning and supervising cadre training and operations, bringing about an integration of police and military

operations aimed at weakening the undercover Viet Cong political structure, teaching English classes in schools, expediting refugee relief, participating in planning for relocating refugees, and encouraging improvement of the Chieu Hoi program that seeks the voluntary surrender of Viet Cong soldiers and political cadre. There were numerous instances of accomplishments in special fields such as rural electrification, land drainage, agricultural extension work, reorganization of district offices, and public relations campaigns.

#### SUMMARY

The Vietnamese author and former official in the Ministry of Information, Nguyen Thai, states in his book, ". . . for South Vietnam the relationship between the government and the people will determine whether the anti-Communist strategic programs, supported by American aid, will be successful or not."<sup>31</sup> The district advisory program was conceived at a time when the poor relationship between the government and the people threatened disaster. Certainly improvements have resulted since the dark days of early 1964 although it is impossible to judge the exact contributions of the advisors.. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that:

- The district advisory program has been extremely well received by the district chiefs and other local Vietnamese officials.

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<sup>31</sup>Nguyen Thai, Is Vietnam Viable?, p. 11.

- Districts receiving advisors have experienced a boost of morale and almost in every case have demonstrated a higher level of successful activity in the military and civilian aspects of pacification.

- The advisors have been usefully engaged in a wide variety of pursuits contributing in some way to the basic aims of pacification.

- Civilian-type duties have consumed much of the advisor's time thus confirming the original concept that the district advisors should be the representatives of the U.S. Mission as a whole, not just the military command element.

- The continued expansion of the number of teams as a result of requests from the field attests to the valuable contributions of the program.

Even assuming that the Viet Cong are defeated militarily or that fighting ceases as a result of negotiations, a district advisory system for "advising in government", whether staffed by military officers or civilians, will be a powerful instrument in Vietnam to help bring about the kind of government - people relationship that will be successful in the long run.

As young Captain Ray, already identified as the district advisor of Nha Be, commented shortly before being killed in the performance of his duty by a Viet Cong sniper bullet:

I think there could be no finer job in Vietnam, in terms of the background one acquires in what President Johnson called "the stubborn realities of the pursuit of peace." For the district advisory team is directly involved in three of our most pressing international problems: the



delicacies of dealing with allies who desire our support while resenting any hint of interference; the grass roots administration of foreign aid (in terms of insuring that our aid gets to the people who need it); and the military confrontation of Communist revolutionary warfare.

- Captain James F. Ray.<sup>32</sup>

*Robert M. Montague Jr.*  
*Lt Col* *Det*

ROBERT M. MONTAGUE, JR.  
Lt Col, Artillery

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<sup>32</sup>James F. Ray, The Role of the District Advisor, p. 5.

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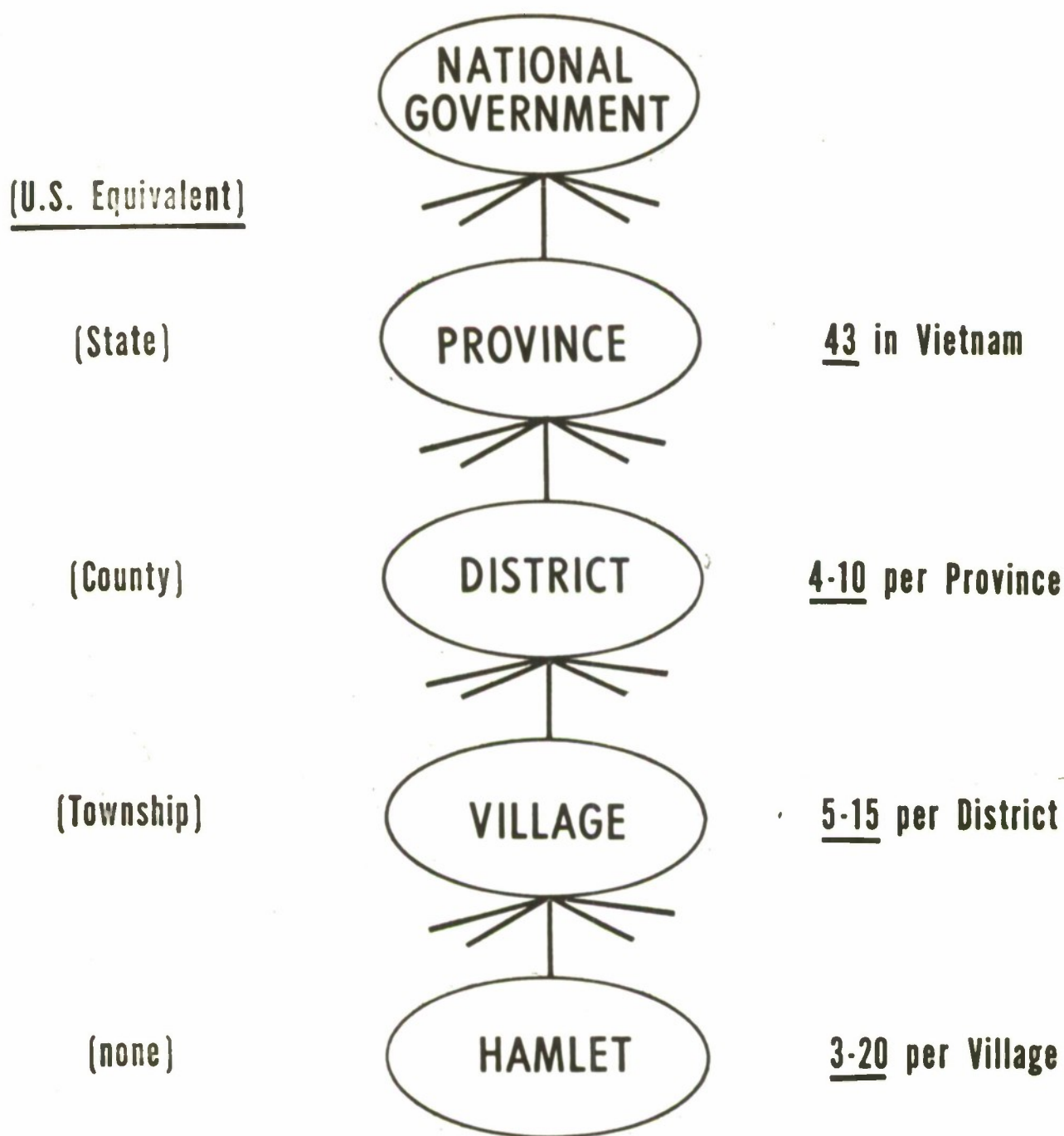
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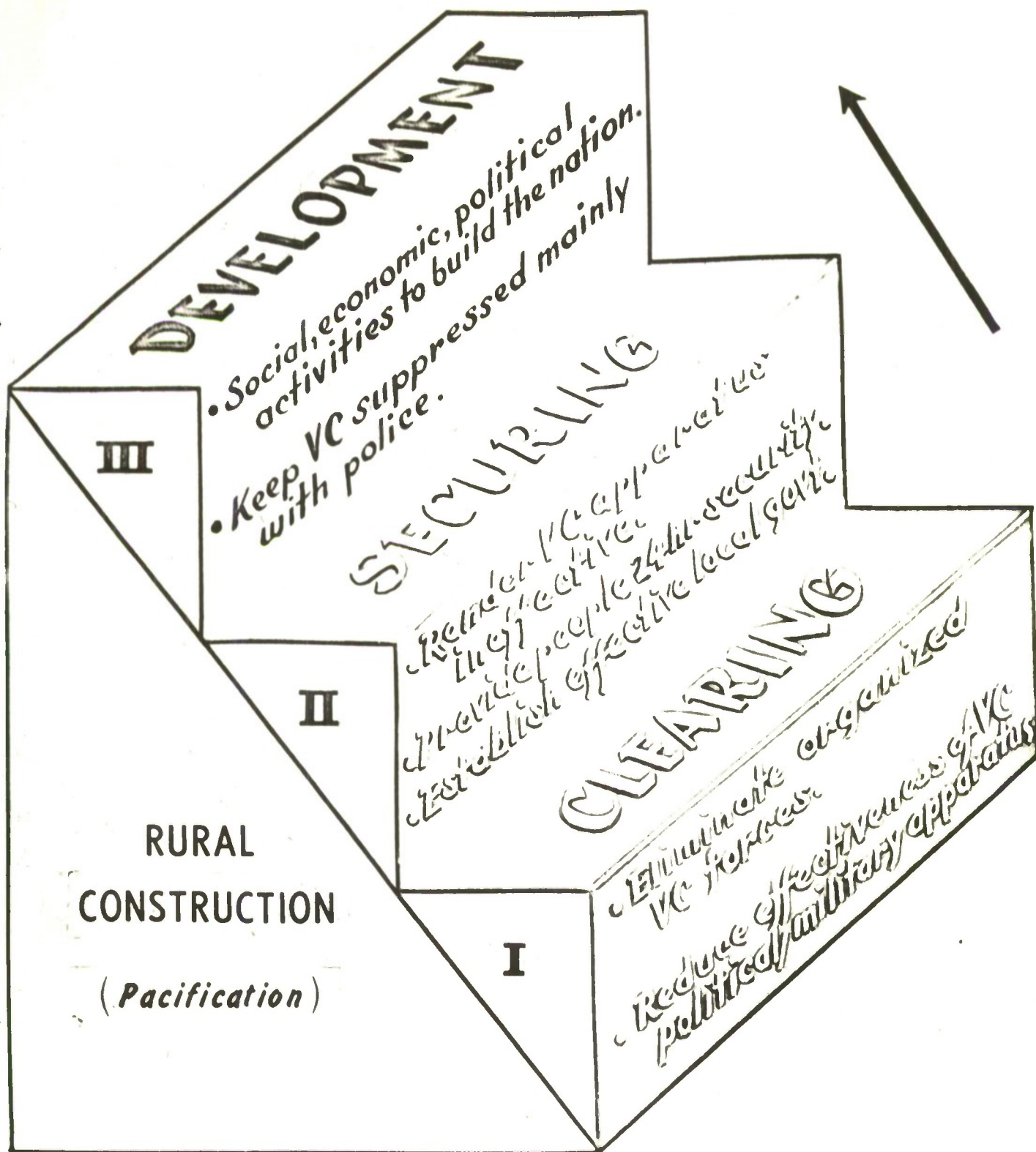
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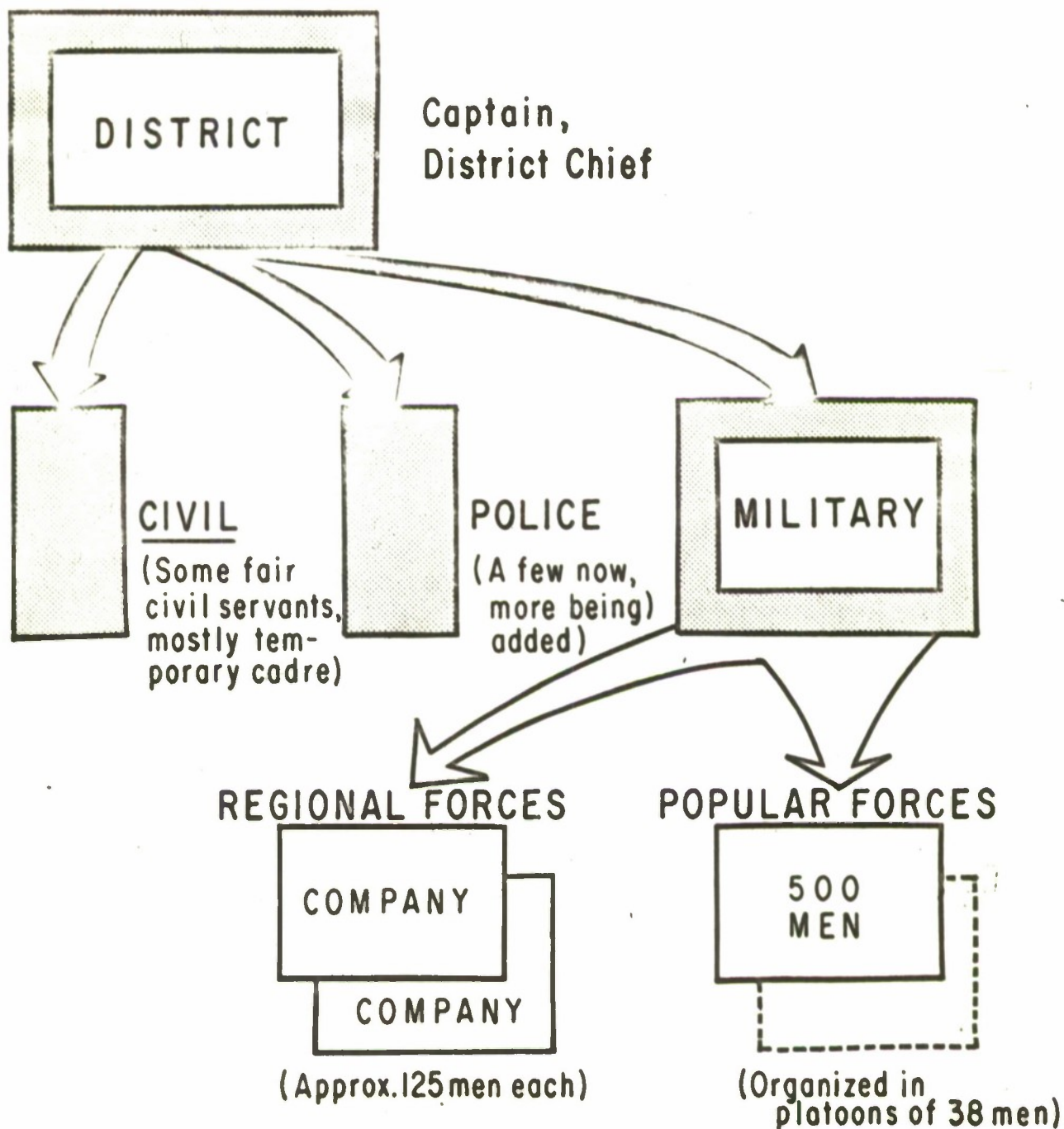
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**VIETNAMESE GOVERNMENTAL STRUCTURE**



PHASES AND ACTIVITIES OF RURAL CONSTRUCTION



**TYPICAL DISTRICT RESOURCES**

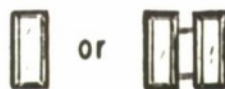


DISTRICT ADVISOR



Team commander;  
Works directly with  
District Chief

ASSISTANT DISTRICT ADVISOR



Asst. Team commander;  
Works as District  
Advisor desires.

OPERATIONS/INTELLIGENCE SERGEANT



Works principally with  
district military staff.

LIGHT WEAPONS INFANTRY ADVISOR



Trains and advises  
district Popular and  
Regional Force units.

MEDICAL ADVISOR



Assists District  
Health Service;  
Medical civic action.

RADIO OPERATOR



Operates team's  
communications;  
Handyman.

**DISTRICT ADVISORY TEAM**



